DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 324 964 FL 018 951

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TITLE Listening for What?
PUB DATE Apr 90
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the World Congress of Applied Linguistics sponsored by the International Association of Applied Linguistics (9th, Thessaloniki, Greece, April 15-21, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; Foreign Countries; *Listening Comprehension; *Listening Skills; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; Student Needs; *Vocabulary Development; *Word Recognition

ABSTRACT

Second language students often fail to pick up sequences of sounds correctly, not because they can not recognize the sounds in questions but because they make incorrect generalizations or lack general mental agility. Listening in a foreign language is more concerned with vocabulary knowledge and expectation than with phoneme recognition. One classroom approach uses sophisticated guessing as an active policy in the process of word recognition. Students often avoid sophisticated guessing because of uncertainty. Most early teaching materials reinforce this attitude. This approach works best if the context is highly constraining or if the word that needs to be recognized is uniquely structured. Students expect to hear a pattern of sounds conforming to their idea of the individual shapes of words. Students should sometimes be confronted with listening exercises, in which all words are familiar, to develop their guessing potential and become familiar with the types of variation typical in connected speech. (MSE)

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Listening for What?

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Paper read at AILA-1990, Thessaloniki, Greece

LISTENING FOR WHAT?

Ladies and Gentlemen, anyone who has been involved in the teaching of listening proficiency to second language learners knows that students often fail to pick up sequences of sounds correctly, not because they cannot recognize the sounds in question, but because they make false generalisations or show a lack of mental agility. Let me give you two examples from personal experience to make this clear.

The sentences: The country is going down the deep end.
and: I wore my new brown shoes

were understood by some advanced Dutch university students of English as:

The country is going down to depend.
and: I wore ??? shoes. (brand-name? Minubran?)

These examples demonstrate that listening to a foreign language is often a matter more concerned with vocabulary and linguistic expectancy than of correct recognition of individual sounds. 'The deep end' and 'to depend' sound very similar, and the suggested 'Manubran' is very much like the target 'my new brown'. In fact, it may well have been the case that an acoustic analysis of the words wouldn't have favoured one interpretation over the other. It's the linguistic sense that determines what was actually said, or more accurately: it determines what was actually intended.

Apparently students feel insecure with respect to sophisticated linguistic guessing and they even resort to interpretations that don't make any meaningful sense. In this example advanced university students should have realised that their interpretations were not very likely to be correct. 'Going down to depend on what?' 'Manubran?' What's Manubran? At least the second student was aware of the unlikeliness of the suggested word 'Manubran', whereas the first student blindly accepted a sentence which, after some thinking, he should have discarded as very odd. These kind of examples are quite well-known and I'm convinced that you could come up with lots of similar errors.

Essentially what needs to be done in teaching listening proficiency is to create a greater awareness of the linguistic structure of a second language and to emphasize the need for expansion of vocabulary. Now even if I know that these recommendations are the vital elements on which improving listening proficiency hinges, I will not go into those today. What I will do is to show that recognition of the sounds, that an analysis of the acoustic information may be carried out in a much more flexible way than many of us are willing to accept, and that possibly we have overemphasized phoneme-recognition in the past.

What I will plead for this afternoon is an approach where sophisticated guessing is an active policy in the process of word recognition. Students often do not dare to apply sophisticated guessing, because of their uncertainty. They feel unqualified, as it were, because they think that a word which they failed to recognize was actually perceived correctly, so that it might be a word that actually exists, but that they happen not to know. Yet,

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what they fail to realize is that many misperceptions involve rather simple and well-known words, as is evidenced from the two examples that I just gave you, so that the student's professed ignorance is actually in other words a combination of uncertainty and laziness.

This student attitude is reinforced by the greater part of the teaching-material at the early learning stages. To help the student, most listening exercises are spoken by people who articulate slowly and carefully and the recordings are made under optimal conditions. This teaches the pupils to rely heavily on acoustics in speech perception, whereas in their native language they pay a great deal of attention to the non-acoustic features, such as context and knowledge of the world.

To demonstrate the relative importance of the acoustic signal I will ask you to listen to three sentences which have been masked by heavy noise. Each sentence will be played twice. I used English for this demonstration, but I warn you in advance that it will be very hard to understand the sentences. If you pick up the idea please don't spoil the fun and keep silent. Here we go:

VE KOPF 'TOARIM VE 'TEPPAW GRAT
VE CLI'NIMIFPER BE'THEMBIGGER BE'DAIPADAW 'TOREFEVE IMVE 'OUFE'PONGOMV
ZEETHE 'THEMPEMFIV A'THELIARKER TE'FEETHE

Are there people who managed to pick up a couple of words?

Let me play the sentences again for you while showing the text on a transparancy:

The pot's calling the kettle black
The Prime Minister defended her debatable policies in the House of Commons
These sentences are very hard to perceive

Once you are given the text it becomes quite easy to hear the sounds that you failed to pick up on first presentation. But I still have a little surprise in store for you. Let's now listen again to these three sentences without the distorting effect of the masking noise.

SENTENCES AS ABOVE in mutilated form

This is what you actually heard! And this apparently still led to some form of meaningful interpretation, since you decided that the sentences WERE meaningful! If I'd introduced this demonstration by saying that we were now going to listen to three nonsense-utterances under heavy noise, you wouldn't have been able to pick up what was said.

What has happened in these sentences is that I consistently changed all consonants for others that are similar in manner of articulation without violating the phonological structure of English. So a 'p' could become a 't' or a 'k' , an 'l' could become a 'r' or a 'w' etc. The result is speech that is no longer understandable, but apparently there is sufficient information present after this reduction in redundancy. In adverse circumstances a global acoustic analysis coupled with strong sophisticated linguistic guesswork may still result in accurate reconstruction of the intended message.

Of course it stands to reason that such an approach works best if the context is highly constraining, as in proverbs for instance, or if the word that needs to be perceived is fairly uniquely structured. Long words like 'articulation' are recognizable with very little precise information. Its VC-structure VCVCCVCVCC is probably sufficiently specific to set it apart from any other word in English solely on the basis of this rough distinction. It might be quite interesting to determine how redundant words on average are. As you probably know this uniqueness of word patterns is used in some well-known word recognition theories, like Marslen-Wilson's Cohort theory. We need to hunt for the essential characteristics that underly perception.

Trying to do just that, a student of mine found out that manipulation of material as in the demonstration a moment ago, need not be too problematic as long as we change sounds on the basis of place of articulation. But if we change the manner of articulation then recognition becomes very poor. Yet, what we must remember is that these types of mutilation are carried out on the basis of articulatory features, rather than on the basis of perceptual features. It could well be that a better insight into the principles of perception yield a totally new set of perceptual features from which we need t[illegible]rk. What I mean is this: In the demonstration we chose to manipulate the p[illegible]of articulation, since many studies have shown that this type of con[illegible]ion occurs much more frequently than manner-changed confusions. But it is by no means certain that this type of place-changed confusion generally underlies perception. It may well be that listeners are far better aided by a new set of features, which are exclusively perception based, such as a grouping of sounds that share the same intensity level or the same duration. In fact, this is even quite likely. By means of modern techniques, such as multi-dimensional scaling, it can be shown that in perceptual confusion studies the 's' sound often remains distinctly separate from other fricatives. This doesn't surprise people, because anyone who has ever tried to prompt someone else at school knows that it's the 's' that gives you away. Apparently its pitch-impression (if I may rather carelessly call it that) often prohibits confusion with sounds like 'f' or 'sh'. To my mind it would be very helpful if more research was carried out into the specific features that play a part in perception. Knowledge of those features might be of paramount importance to our understanding of the process of perceiving speech. And I would not at all be surprised if these features were of a totally different nature than the ones used today, which have their origins in linguistics and in articulatory phonetics.

But let's return to the students who misperceived 'the deep end' and 'my new brown'. Clearly these students carried out a fairly successful acoustic analysis when they responded 'to depend' and 'Manubran' and clearly they relied heavily on this acoustic analysis for their response. But the tragic thing is that my demonstration of the mutilated sentences exposes this strategy as inadequate. Students expect to hear a pattern of sounds that conform to their idea of the individual shapes of words. And that's where they go wrong. The simple fact that the mutilated sentences can sometimes be understood means that there is tremendous acoustic variation in daily life. Otherwise our processing capacity wouldn't be willing to work on such highly deviating material. I'm not saying that we like it, but we can do it. And sometimes we don't even notice!

Following this line it means that students should sometimes be confronted with listening exercises in which all the words are known to them. If they can be sure that each and every word in the exercise is well-known to them, they will develop their guessing potential and be encouraged to segment sequences that they didn't pick up correctly, in another fashion. Of course

this presupposes a thorough knowledge of the types of variation that occur in connected speech, either learnt explicitly or picked up intuitively.

All too often students are not aware of this type of variation. They DO know that individual speakers may vary a lot from each other. That's why they have to get used to dialect speech, that's why they need some time to get accustomed to individual speakers with their own idiosyncracies, but after a period of customization, students can more or less successfully handle these types of variation. What they can't handle - because we forget to teach them this - is the variation that comes with the language itself: the differences between the spoken and the written form, and notably the differences between spoken forms in isolation and in connected speech. All too often students think that every written symbol has to be sounded. It is possible to improve the students' listening proficiency substantially by simply pointing out that this is not the case, by telling them that they hear things that were never said, by telling them that the ear is a very deceptive source of information, because our mental analysis takes precedence, as was evidenced in the demonstration. Other example: my students inevitably pronounce the word IRON as /airen/ and if I correct them by saying /aien/ they retort: 'Well what did I say then? A classical case of spelling influence. But it's clear that if the word IRON occurs unexpectedly, let's say in a sentence of this type: Iron this green blouse, it might be understood as I AND THIS GREEN BLOUSE. And the reason for this error is that the student subconsciously is not willing to accept the sounds uttered as the word IRON, because the 'r' sound is missing.

So what we need to do in our teaching is to confront them constantly with this type of problem, so as to develop an awareness of the tremendous amount of variance that occurs all the time. That might even benefit their fluency, because they will then realize that some awkward combinations needn't be pronounced, that some sounds may simply be assimilated, or elided, which will result in much more rapid and more fluent speech, without the well-known hampered performance where students stumble over sequences of sounds or pause between words that are hard to link up.
(HE HAS - pause - THREE APPLES)

Ladies and gentlemen, our time this afternoon is rather limited, so I cannot go into a couple of other issues that pertain to the development of listening proficiency, but I would like to round off by giving you the results of an extremely simple listening test, which shows that people are quite reluctant to use their linguistic knowledge to the full in a foreign language. I asked Dutch students of English to listen to number-names (numbers like 723, 485 etc.) These students had all gone through at least eight years of English training, but when they listened to these numbernames under reduced listening conditions, their performance on Dutch numbers was significantly better than on English numbers. Clearly this is not due to the material, which was very simple indeed and very well-known to them. And when I asked English people living in Holland to take part in the same test, the results were exactly the opposite: their performance on Dutch was poorer than on English.

Now, if it's not the material and if it's not the level of difficulty of the task at hand, then the difference is probably a psychological one. Apparently performance was not dependent on knowledge, but on the subjects' self-imposed uncertainty, on not feeling qualified to make sufficient use of linguistic guessing.

This simple test was an eye-opener to the students. They suddenly understood that their listening strategies for the two languages differed, because of their training in the past and their limited command of vocabulary in the past. But even if they had long outgrown their poor knowledge of vocabulary, they adhered to an approach that is only advantageous at the

elementary and intermediate levels of second language learning. The mere realisation that they should make better use of linguistic expectancy improved their listening skills after this experience. After all, the average speaker's active vocabulary ranges from 4,000 to 7,000 words. When the students realised that they themselves presumably know MORE words passively, their attitude to listening proficiency was no longer considered a vocabulary problem. Thus they tried to make more sense of what they thought they heard. And if they couldn't make any sense of it, they tried to segment the utterance differently and used their linguistic expectancy in a more creative and intelligent way.

I may have offered you less concrete recommendations than you had hoped for. And I may have pleaded for an approach that you intuitively already favour. Be that as it may, I still hope that I have given you some food for thought for the development of your pupils' listening skills. It's not the final word, but then again, who would wish to claim that there is such a thing as 'the final word', certainly not in language teaching. Thank you.

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Date Filmed

March 29, 1991